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ABSTRACT

Discussions of reform in English studies typically focus on ideology. The focus of this paper puts the spotlight on the intended effects of classroom practice on students, on whatever is integral and valuable about the instructors' work as it appears to them. But there is also a geographical context that makes the work mean differently as it circulates beyond classrooms and institutions. English studies functions in multiple spaces: the classroom, professional communities, the home institutions where programs are housed. The utility and growth of English relative to other humanities disciplines is based on its greater effectiveness in providing and assessing "transferable" skills and "basic" cultural knowledge to diverse groups of students. Most majors will work in settings in which their expertise in English has value only non-specifically as a transferable set of knowledges. In some sense, these transferred meanings are present only at a distance, often in spaces where instructors have little influence, namely in the workplaces toward or away from which students are being circulated. One way to address such questions is to theorize them in class, making geographical forces and relationships part of the content of critical pedagogy. The paper questions how many students have changed their choice of career because of new forms of political thinking made available through theory; or, how many have adapted critical theory to fashion new forms of resistance in their professions and workplaces. (NKA)

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Reinventing Institutional Space: Remapping the Geography of Labor in English Studies

During the last fifteen years, discussions of reform in English studies have typically focused on ideology. For instance, Gerald Graff has focused on the discipline's failure to exploit ideological conflicts in curricula, and Robert Scholes has called the discipline to task for separating fields of "literature," "creative writing," and "composition" in a rigid hierarchy of value. In composition too, this focus on ideology has proved extraordinarily powerful, as figures such as James Berlin and Pat Bizzell work to situate the teaching of writing within the broader interdisiciplinary discourse of critical pedagogy. For many of us, this attentiveness towards the play of ideologies in the classroom has helped demystify the hidden curriculum of formalist literary studies and current-traditional rhetoric and led us to rethink our classroom practice. But increasingly, some theorists have felt something missing by focusing on ideology. Whether we think of English curricula in terms of conflict or the familiar metaphors of foundations, development, logical sequence, and hierarchy,this focus on ideology puts the spotlight on the intended effects of our practices on students, on whatever is integral, orderly, and valuable about our work as it appears to us. But our work also functions in a geographical context that makes our work mean differently as it circulates beyond our classrooms and institutions.

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To think geographically is, in our definition, to configure human relationships in space that can be considered both real and metaphorical. In fact, there are multiple such spaces in which English studies functions: the most familiar being the space of the classroom, the space of professional communities such as the one assembled here, the space of our home institutions where the programs we work within are housed. These are, in some sense, easy spaces to talk about because they are immediately present to us at different times in our professional lives. But we want to argue that there are other spaces in which our work functions, spaces that are just as material in mediating the effects of English but not as immediately visible as classrooms or professional gatherings. These spaces are, in a sense, adjacent to the familiar spaces where we do our work, but our work, does not have the meanings we desire in them, which is one reason why we tend to ignore them.

Nonetheless, we are continually confronted with evidence that the work we intend to perform - developing student writers, democratic subjects, critical thinkers, or whatever - is constantly used by others to serve ends that we are not a direct party to. Here is one concrete example. We are aware of the irony of writing letters of recommendation for professional school for students who excel in courses we teach that critique the class biases of American schooling. Perhaps we are aware that the admissions committee probably reads our letter, and the 'A' on the transcript for Eng. 305, not as evidence of the specific and sophisticated moral thinking that the student did regarding American schooling, which is what we valued in her work, but as evidence that she is the "cream of the crop" of our graduating class. Perhaps reluctantly, after all our critique of school hierarchy, we place a check in the box that designates that this student is

in the "top 5%" of all students we have taught.

Considered geographically, the institutional value of English in modern schooling resides primarily in its distributive functions and only secondarily in its ideological functions. By this we mean, as Evan Watkins has argued at length in *Work Time*, that the utility and growth of English relative to other humanities disciplines in the last century is not based on the inherently greater vitality of the discipline as compared to, say, art history or philosophy, but on the greater effectiveness of English in providing and assessing "transferrable" skills and "basic" cultural knowledge to diverse groups of students. While composition curricula, not literature curricula, have been overtly tagged with this so-called service function, the entire discipline in fact functions within this same complex geography of service relationships. Consider that while in the order of 30-50 thousand Bachelor's degrees in English were granted each year in the 80s, only 600-1000 doctorates were granted each year between 1980 and 1994. Clearly, in terms of the distributive meaning of work in English, only a tiny minority of English majors will work within a regime of space and time and within a framework of value similar to those in which our work as teachers and scholars has meaning. Most majors will work in settings in which their expertise in English has value only non-specifically, that is, only as a transferrable set of knowledges and competencies that will enable them to do things other than what they were specifically trained to do in English, and within a different regime of space and time.

In some sense, these transferred meanings of our work are present only at a distance, often in spaces where we have little influence, namely in the workplaces or professional settings towards or away from which our students are being circulated. But we say geographical spaces are best described as

adjacent because the extrinsic meanings of English often surface in the classroom, the department, the professional meeting, by a kind of ventriloquy that we often do our best to ignore until it slaps us in the face. To cite an example, one of us teaches a writing class which is populated mostly by medical students who are in a six year combined undergraduate / medical degree program. Recruited from the top of their high school classes, these students are typically well-prepared and for the most part able, without much trouble, to produce polished and competent writing that has usually been well-received by their teachers. However, when one of us challenges this sense of easily reproducible and serviceable writing competence, as we did early last semester, it produces little discussion but an extraordinarily high level of tension and anxiety in the class. A week or so later, the hidden meanings of that tension break to the surface as a student angrily complains that the teacher is expecting too much, that the first biochemistry exam was given during the same week the paper was due and that the medical school faculty who will decide who continues in medical school and who will be tracked elsewhere will not care nearly as much about this writing class as the student's knowledge of biochemisty. Some students are embarrassed at the crassness of this revelation. The professor contests the ideology behind the supposition that biochemisty is necessarily more important than critical literacy in the preparation of a doctor. But critique notwithstanding, the geographical functions of such a "truth" are not really open to question. About the values that have been geographically coded in this space, the student is largely correct.

The moral of this story is not that the writing professor should accept competency or proficiency as a standard so that the students can allocate more time to their study of biochemistry. Indeed, the tension described

here suggests that the functions of distribution working through a biochemistry course compete with those operating in an English course. And even though, geographically speaking, the English course occupies an inferior position, we do not deny that the distributive function of the English course is important, as is the learning that goes on there. This story is interesting to us because it marks a moment when the felt reality of geographical space operating invisibly beside the ostensible content of the course becomes open to ideological critique. But more importantly, it raises the question of how different pedagogical regimes produce different distributive effects from English in relation to other distributive centers in higher education. How are the demographics of student success and failure different in biochemistry and English, and especially in an English course so explicitly adjacent to biochemistry? And more generally, how do our pedagogical choices in English affect not only our students' thinking but also the function of our courses in distributing human capital in society?

One way to address such questions is to theorize them in class, making geographical forces and relationships part of the content of critical pedagogy. But this is only a partial solution to the problem, because the distributive meanings of our work continue to function alongside curricular ideology, even if the curriculum focuses on theorizing the institutional place and function of English studies in the larger world. Students will succeed and fail in this undertaking too, and the distributive meanings of our work will continue to whisper in the background. In this light, it is interesting to consider exactly how "theory" has been institutionally located within English studies, too often as a kind of high-value cultural capital offered mostly to undergraduates in a single, upperdivision requirement for English majors and mostly confined to graduate seminars.

How many students have changed their choice of career because of new forms of political thinking made available through theory? Or, how many students have adapted critical theory to fashion new forms of resistence in their professions and workplaces?

It seems to us that there is very little research in English studies that addresses such questions, and even less that attempts to analyze the effects of curricular and pedagogical reforms in spaces governed by different regimes of work, time and reward than our classrooms. While the field of composition studies has attacked inequality in the workplace of English, this critique has frequently failed to consider the larger forces, constituencies and relationships that articulate the terms of service in English. Instead, we have largely regarded labor issues as a matter of how work and rewards are distributed within English departments and between professional fields in English, especially composition as compared to literary specialisms. Obviously, there is an important issue here. Literature faculty are not by and large subjected to reductive external service demands to the same degree as compositionists. So there is still much work to be done in struggling for institutional parity. But labor has become increasingly proletarianized across English. More and more faculty trained in literature find themselves teaching course loads with significant components of composition and general education for non-majors. And even the success of tenure-track composition faculty in gaining equity with literature faculty shows no sign of negating other inequities, such as our continued dependence on large numbers of parttime faculty and graduate students to teach most English courses.

If we wish to exploit our service value to the institution instead of merely being exploited by it, we will need to develop new ways to think

about and act collectively in relation to the geographical relationships that are shaping our future. Partly this is a matter of political strategy, of forming alliances with English and non-English faculty capable of resisting definitions of reading and writing that effectively reduce literacy to a set of technologies for receiving and acting on orders. But it is also a matter of changing the way we think about expertise, service, and the relationship between the two, so that we can pose the material circumstances of our work as a problem to be transformed through collective action, rather than only as a threat to our individual psychic welfare. As professionals, we gain a sense of our freedom, and a certain cultural capital within the institution, by representing ourselves as intellectuals whose importance is derived from what we know and the concrete work we can perform. Yet English teachers also glimpse the extrinsic meanings extracted from their work - by students who translate our comments about learning into a calculus of grades and careers, by faculty who judge writing courses as a kind of grammatical penance preliminary to the eucharist of disciplinary knowledge, by deans who reduce our scholarly work to numerical productivity bylines, and so forth. In response to such realities, teachers often experience an anxiety which they attribute to students' limitations or the broader social sphere's misunderstanding of the value of humanistic knowledge. Belief in the inherent value of our knowledge is alluring because it both contains a seed of truth, and fulfills our desire for recognition. However, it also promotes alienation and resentment, as many teachers observe that in their daily lives their work is often seen as performing service in the most reductive senses: introducing students from other disciplines to culture or helping them gain mechanical writing skills. In such a context, it is hardly surprising that many teachers come to desire a life "outside" the

geographical space in which they find themselves, eventually coming to see even the material circumstances of students themselves, and the needs they embody, as threats to their professional identities.

Considering our work geographically entails expanding what we mean by pedagogy. Thinking about pedagogy in terms of the familiar space of the classroom leads us to address questions about what and how we should be teaching students, what contributions our specialisms can make to student learning. Thinking geographically, however, casts such questions in different spaces, in spaces beneath or besides the ostensible topics of our discussions, in spaces towards or away from which the persons we teach are circulated. How do contending knowledges and practices and regimes of labor within English studies distribute students differently in the institution or differently to other institutions? How do different curricular regimes shape the demographics of student success and failure, and the flow of human capital in society? How do we suppose the knowledge and cultural practices which students develop in our classes will serve them when understanding and resisting power in settings where the organization of work and time may differ greatly from its organization in our classrooms? Insofar as we do talk about these questions now, how do we do so? Who talks about them, where, and to whom?